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‘GET SMART ABOUT ANTIBIOTICS’ SAYS HEALTH OFFICIALS

INDIANAPOLIS—State and local health officials have news for parents this cold and flu season: antibiotics don’t work for a cold or the flu.

“Antibiotics kill bacteria, not viruses,” said State Health Commissioner Gregory N. Larkin, M.D. “And colds, flu, and most sore throats are caused by viruses. Antibiotics don’t touch viruses – never have, never will. And it’s not really news. It’s a long-documented medical fact.”

But tell that to parents seeking relief for a child’s runny nose. Research shows that most Americans have either missed the message about appropriate antibiotic use or they simply don’t believe it. It’s a case of mistaken popular belief winning out over fact. According to public opinion research, there is a perception that “antibiotics cure everything.”

So, health officials in Indiana are taking the lead to educate Hoosiers parents and health care providers about the dangers of inappropriate antibiotic use, including the risk of antibiotic resistance. Indiana is one of only 12 states to receive funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) from its “Get Smart about Antibiotics” campaign.

This funding supports the Indiana Coalition for Antibiotic Resistance Education Strategies (ICARES). ICARES is a coalition of community members formed in 1999 to inform physicians and patients about the potential harm associated with unnecessary antibiotic use. Public health, hospitals, insurance companies, laboratories, and pharmacists are all represented on the coalition. Among its members are the Indiana State Department of Health and several local health departments, including the Marion County Health Department.

“The more information we can share with parents, adults, and health care community, the healthier we can keep our communities. This is an important message that our residents need to understand for their own health benefit,” said Marion County Health Director Virginia A. Caine, M.D.

According to Drs. Larkin and Caine, taking antibiotics when they are not needed can do more harm than good. Widespread inappropriate use of antibiotics is fueling an increase in drug-resistant bacteria. And sick individuals aren’t the only people who can suffer the consequences. Families and entire communities feel the impact when disease-causing germs become resistant to antibiotics.

“The most obvious consequence of inappropriate antibiotic use is its effect on the sick patient,” said Dr. Larkin. “When antibiotics are incorrectly used to treat children or adults with viral infections, such as colds and flu, they aren’t getting the best care for their condition. A course of antibiotics won’t fight the virus, make the patient feel better, yield a quicker recovery or keep others from getting sick.”

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GET SMART ABOUT ANTIBIOTICS

ADD ONE

Dr. Larkin says a less obvious consequence of antibiotic overuse is the boost it gives to drug-resistant disease-causing bacteria. Almost every type of bacteria has become stronger and less responsive to antibiotic treatment when it really is needed. These antibiotic-resistant bacteria can quickly spread to family members, school mates and co-workers – threatening the community with a new strain of infectious disease that is more difficult to cure and more expensive to treat.

According to the CDC, antibiotic resistance is one of the world's most pressing public health problems. Americans of all ages can lower this risk by talking to their doctors and using antibiotics appropriately during this cold and flu season.

Two major reasons that antimicrobial resistance occurs are overuse (such as taking antibiotics for viral illnesses, i.e. colds) and misuse (such as skipping doses or not completing the full course of antibiotics). Studies have demonstrated 50% of all antibiotic use is either unnecessary or inappropriate.

Antibiotic resistant infections, which occur in the community and health care facilities, are painful, difficult to treat, and increase the cost of health care dramatically. Some of the more common antibiotic resistant infections that affect Indiana's citizens include Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), *Clostridium difficile*, *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, and Tuberculosis. There are many others that are common or emerging as major threats to the health of Hoosiers.

Dr. Larkin says children and adults with viral infections recover when the illness has run its course. Colds caused by viruses may last for two weeks or longer. There are measures that can help a person with a cold or flu feel better:

- Increase fluid intake (preferably water or juice and avoid alcohol and caffeine;
- Use a cool mist vaporizer or saline nasal spray to relieve congestion; and
- Soothe throat with ice chips, sore throat spray or lozenges (for older children and adults).

"Viral infections may sometimes lead to bacterial infections," said Dr. Larkin. "Individuals should keep their doctor informed if their illness gets worse or lasts a long time."

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